

Family support workforce skills literature review



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Rationale

Family support relies upon a range of socio-structural and psycho-social theories embedded in a holistic, ecological, and comprehensive approach. It involves both a set of activities and an approach to practice that encourages positive informal social networks through integrated programmes. The services are mainly provided in the family household and in the community, aimed to promote and protect the health, well-being and rights of all children, young people and their families. This policy brief presents findings on family support workforce skills from a systematic review with an opportunity to draw some conclusions about identified workforce skills, as well as gaps to be covered in further research.

Policy implications

- ▶ Family support workforce comprises a broad range of professionals and paraprofessionals (from social work, psychology, pedagogy, medicine and law fields) from both the government and nongovernmental organizations, who employ their resources in supporting different aspects of family functioning.
- ▶ Family support offers developmental, compensatory, or protective support to families as a whole and their members, to provide subsistence, productive development, and integration of the family into the community.
- ▶ One of the findings is about defining family support workforce skills as learned power of doing things in collaborative ways, while supporting different aspects of family functioning in a competent manner, and the ability to use their knowledge effectively and readily in the execution or performance of serving families using holistic, strengths-based and relationship-based practice approach (Zegarac et al., 2021).
- ▶ Considering workforce skills in terms of helping families with children, we can identify skills that are general for a range of professions in various countries. This would enable the standardization of workforce skills and possible transference across professional and paraprofessional workforces in the family support field.

Practical implications

- ▶ One of the biggest practical finding about family support workforce skills refers to defining a concept in order to enable standardisation in global surroundings. One of the implications considers professional profile delivering family support workforce skills. Social workers are the main targeted professionals in studies, albeit other child protection workers were studied too (Zegarac et al., 2021). It is important to stress this particular finding, since it has been argued for a while that in social work and specifically in child protection, the impact of bureaucracy and performance management devastates relationship-based and reflective practice, which is essential in (skilful) activities implemented to strengthen and preserve families, prevent family separation or breakdown, and provide early intervention among families at risk (Ferguson, 2018). These analyses plainly provide a starting point for the further development of a knowledge model in which family support workforce skills will be identified, described, systematized, classified, and compared with distinctive supportive skills.
- ▶ From the areas of specific knowledge, we have identified understanding of the family context, awareness of equality and diversity issues and advanced knowledge about child development, together with insight into available support and resources. From the skills side of theories, we find specific knowledge and professional expertise in cognitive-behavioural strategies, modelling skills, child observation techniques, plan evaluation skills, as well as knowledge and skills in applying specific assessment tools and techniques, also including motivational interviewing.
- ▶ Empirical knowledge gained from research, as a foundation of evidence-based practice, partly overlaps with the skills we have identified in the sphere of specific knowledge, and also contains technical skills recognised in our findings, like the range of communications skills and techniques which have proven to be effective (good listening and reflection, facilitation, showing empathy, repetition, clarification, interpretation, exemplifying to detail behaviour, reasoning to identify knowledge, motivating, rewarding, etcetera).

- ▶ Other skills that we have classified as technical, such as empowering and enabling skill(s), planning skills, decision-making skills, ability to suggest flexible approaches and solutions, adaptability to service users' needs, time-management and organizational skills, overlap with at least three fields in this model: theoretical, empirical and practice wisdom, but are probably also permeated by personal attributes and qualities.
- ▶ To sum up, family support workforce skills is an emergent concept and research related to it needs to be intensified to allow for the establishment of standardized guidelines for family support workforce skills. We are currently committed to it and we hope this paper contributes to the first steps towards that.

Challenges

- ▶ Deeper knowledge would be an asset for standardization, and it would be interesting to compare if there are specific and different professional skills studied at different levels of intervention (Devaney et al., 2013).
- ▶ Another limitation can be the English language used as an inclusion criterion, which would not allow access to all articles published in the area. However, as the studied topic is an emergent topic, this could provide plausible justification for the few and disperse results found. The current study only considered peer-reviewed articles. Probably a number of handbooks, monographs and grey literature contain important data about the subject and should be considered further. Also, the scientific databases considered as well as the descriptors could have affected the results.



Additional resources

Devaney, C., Canavan, J., Landy, F., & Gillen, A. (2013). What works in family support? Child and Family Agency.

Ferguson, H. (2018). How social workers reflect in action and when and why they don't: The possibilities and limits to reflective practice in social work. *Social Work Education*, 37(4), 415–427. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2017.1413083>

Zegarac, N., Burgund Isakov, A, Nunes, C. and Antunes, A. (2021). Workforce skills in family support: A systematic review. *Research on Social Work Practice*, 31(4), 400–409, <https://doi.org/10.1177/10497315211006184>



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